

October 22, 1975

D R A F T

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Effectiveness of US Intelligence Analysis on Vietnam,
December 1974 - April 1975

KEY POINTS

- American intelligence made a continuous, voluminous, and high quality input to US policy makers in the months immediately preceding the end of the war in Vietnam.
- In December 1974, a National Intelligence Estimate correctly assessed North Vietnamese strategy and plans for the first half of 1975.
 - This NIE concluded that in response to a major opportunity the communists might launch an all-out offensive to exploit the situation.
 - The consequences of Thieu's ill-planned and poorly executed decision in mid-March to retrench militarily gave Hanoi such an opportunity, and the North Vietnamese quickly exploited it.
 - The criticality of US military assistance, or lack thereof, was emphasized as a key factor conditioning both South Vietnam's will to resist and North Vietnam's willingness to escalate the level of fighting.
- The record is not without some deficiencies, but they were minor:
 - Early on, the resiliency of the South Vietnamese forces was over-estimated.
 - There was an initial tendency to underestimate the speed and success with which the communists would move to exploit the situation.
- Within three weeks of Thieu's mid-March decision, however, the intelligence community concluded that South Vietnam's fate was sealed and that within a short time North Vietnam would emerge victorious.
 - Beginning in early April 1975, the community concluded that the best the non-communists could obtain would be a negotiated surrender on

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communist terms. Further, the community repeatedly stated that time was working against such an outcome since the communists were preparing for the final assault on Saigon.

- It was stressed that Hanoi, and not an indigenous Viet Cong apparatus in the South, was making all the decisions for the communists, and that once victorious Hanoi would have little interest in maintaining anything but the most threadbare facade of a separate southern state.

Discussion

1. American intelligence made a continuous and voluminous input to US policy makers in the months immediately preceding the end of the war in Vietnam. In the five months before North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon on April 30, 1975, the intelligence community produced two National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) and three interagency memoranda on the prospects for Vietnam. In the same period, two meetings of the NSC and thirteen meetings of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) were held on Vietnam, at each of which the Director of Central Intelligence presented an oral assessment of the situation. In addition, analysts of all intelligence agencies produced during these five months a large number of articles for the community's current publications, ranging from the President's Daily Brief and National Intelligence Digest which were provided each day to the nation's top officials, to situation reports, spot items and weekly review articles which served other senior levels of the government.
2. In the following paragraphs we assess the quality of this intelligence analysis, and relate it to what -- in retrospect -- we now know was happening in Vietnam at the time. An ANNEX to this memorandum (see page A-1) presents summaries and excerpts from the many intelligence estimates and appraisals produced during the period under review. For purposes of clarity, we have divided both the discussion below and the ANNEX into three time frames:

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- A. December 23, 1974 - March 13, 1975: NIE 53/14.3-74, "Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam," was published on December 23 last year and provides a good starting point for this exercise, since it was a comprehensive community assessment of what was likely to happen in Vietnam during the first half of 1975. March 13, 1975 -- the date South Vietnamese President Thieu decided to evacuate the Central Highlands -- can be taken as the date when the war entered its climactic phase.
- B. March 13, 1975 - April 3, 1975: The period from the evacuation of the Highlands to the time when the intelligence community in Washington first made a firm judgment that South Vietnam could not avoid total military defeat in a matter of weeks, or at most a few months.
- C. April 3, 1975 - April 30, 1975: The period of denouement, false hopes of a negotiated settlement, and the American evacuation.

The First Phase: December 1974 to March 13, 1975

3. The Central Intelligence Agency had received late last fall information on future North Vietnamese plans from a very good clandestine source within the Vietnamese Communist southern command (COSVN). In the NIE which was approved by USIB and issued on December 23, 1974, the intelligence community presented firm conclusions that --

TOP SECRET

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- Communist forces in South Vietnam were more powerful than ever before.
- A marked increase in military action by the North Vietnamese was likely in the first half of 1975.
- Hanoi did not, as of December 1974, plan an all-out offensive for the first half of 1975, but the community concluded it was possible that the North Vietnamese would, in response to a major opportunity, quickly revise their plans and move into an all-out offensive.

4. Later events have completely borne these judgments out. North Vietnamese Generals Giap and Dung, in a lengthy analysis of the war published on June 30, 1975, make it clear (a) that Hanoi did not plan an all-out offensive for this past spring, (b) that Hanoi was surprised at the scope of its initial victories in the Highlands and northern MR1, and (c) that only in late March, in response to the new situation, did Hanoi decide to throw everything it had into the battle. (It should be noted that like the North Vietnamese, the US Government also did not anticipate the rapidity of South Vietnam's collapse against a less than all-out offensive. But the intelligence community's judgment about what the North Vietnamese would do in response to such an opportunity was correct.)

5. During January 1975 the North Vietnamese launched a limited offensive to drive South Vietnamese military units out of scantily-populated Phuoc Long Province in northwestern MR 3. They succeeded, and for the first time in the long years of war took complete control of a South Vietnamese province.

The South Vietnamese were unwilling to make a major effort to retake the positions they had lost because they believed it necessary to husband their resources for the defense of more important areas. The North Vietnamese, however, were emboldened by the fact that South Vietnam (and the US) did not react more strongly to the loss of Phuoc Long. The article by General's Giap and Dung noted above suggests that the experience in Phuoc Long encouraged them to press ahead with the larger initiatives they had already been planning in the Central Highlands.

6. Another development occurred during January and February which strengthened North Vietnam's confidence in the course of events and correspondingly weakened morale in the South Vietnamese armed forces and government. In these months it became increasingly clear to Vietnamese on both sides that the US Congress would approve very little further military aid for Saigon. Throughout 1974 the course of various Congressional hearings had indicated the difficulties of obtaining additional aid, but Congressional actions of early 1975 seemed to shut off the possibility of further substantial aid with greater finality than heretofore. The impact of these actions on the morale of South Vietnamese diplomats in Washington was evident, and -- in retrospect -- it is clear that a similar mood of demoralization began to spread among the military and government officials in South Vietnam.

7. Throughout this period, the intelligence on North Vietnamese intentions continued to show that Hanoi was planning a major increase of military action, but still at levels less than an all-out offensive. Hard evidence

was received of a new urgency in the conscription of recruits into the army in North Vietnam, and more tenuous evidence appeared that one -- and possibly two or three -- divisions from North Vietnam's strategic reserve were moving south. Clandestine reporting from a reliable source with access to COSVN planning, however, indicated that the North Vietnamese were still planning on "total victory" in 1976, not 1975.

8. On March 6, Communist forces began their spring offensive with heavy attacks against Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. They captured that provincial capital on March 12, and within one day President Thieu had precipitously decided -- without careful planning and with no consultation with the US -- to withdraw all his forces from the Pleiku-Kontum area to the west.

The Second Phase: March 13 to April 3, 1975

9. The ensuing badly organized retreat and decimation of all South Vietnamese forces which had been in the Highlands was to prove the decisive turning point of the war. Thieu's decision in theory was not bad. Essentially he chose in favor of a major retrenchment, giving up most of the Central Highlands and a large portion of northern MR 1 to the communists. Thieu's decision was based on:

- A belief that the South Vietnamese were overextended and faced with a greatly superior North Vietnamese force.
- A belief that South Vietnam was faced with the prospect of dwindling US military assistance.

The move was bold in concept, but disastrous in execution. What was planned as an orderly retreat quickly became a rout as command chains broke down, contradictory orders were passed, massive flows of refugees clogged withdrawal routes, and general confusion and then panic were set in train.

10. Thieu clearly hoped to take the communists by surprise. Instead, he caught his own troops and commanders (and the US) by surprise. He deliberately kept his own counsel, not consulting any Americans about what he planned to do. Thus, there were no warnings to the US Mission in Saigon of the timing of this major shift in South Vietnamese military strategy. There had been, however, some earlier indications, which were reported in intelligence publications -- that the South Vietnamese were willing in some cases to give up territory in order to gain time. But nothing of the magnitude or unilateral nature of Thieu's mid-March decision was indicated by this evidence.

11. The intelligence community was quick to grasp and report the consequences of Thieu's strategy and its faulty implementation. Initially, however, there was an underestimation of just how adverse the situation was likely to become. Thus on March 17 the intelligence community concluded that Hanoi, sensing an opportunity to achieve a quick victory, would move quickly to exploit the GVN's new vulnerability. It was believed the most of the northern highlands would be lost as well as Hue, although it was believed that the communists would probably bypass Da Nang. This assessment also clearly flagged the critical -- and basically unpredictable -- psychological factors which would largely determine the course of events, particularly

the Vietnamese perception of US policy and assistance. In retrospect, this assessment clearly identified the factors which could lead to South Vietnam's unraveling, but it understated the likelihood that a total collapse would in fact occur.

12. By late March, the situation had deteriorated even further, and our assessments of South Vietnam's prospects were becoming more pessimistic. For example, on March 27 the intelligence community concluded that Da Nang and the South Vietnamese enclaves in MR 2 would be lost to the communists. At the same time, it was believed that the South Vietnamese would be able to survive in the southern part of the country. Although this assessment failed to predict that the downward spiral of South Vietnamese fortunes was irreversible, it did -- for the first time -- warn that the war had taken a turn which was likely to lead to South Vietnam's ultimate defeat by early 1976.

The Third Phase: April 3 to April 30, 1975

13. By early April, even these faint glimmers of optimism had disappeared from US intelligence assessments. Saigon's fate was considered sealed -- it was only a matter of time and tactics. An April 3 community assessment (repeated a day later in another appraisal of the situation) concluded that in a matter of months, if not weeks, Saigon would collapse militarily or a government would be installed that would agree to a settlement on communist terms. Moreover, it was estimated that the time for arriving at any kind of negotiated settlement was short; Hanoi was deploying overwhelming military

force for a coup de grace. These assessments* were on the mark -- the situation had taken an irretrievable turn for the worse, and the clock was counting for Saigon's collapse and defeat.

14. By the end of the first week in April, the major arena for intelligence judgments on the situation in Vietnam had shifted from formal intelligence community products to briefings by the Director of Central Intelligence to the NSC and the WSAG. On April 9, the DCI reported to the NSC that the strategic balance was decisively in favor of the communists and that the latter would take whatever action was necessary to force the war to an early conclusion -- probably by early summer. To underscore this assessment, the DCI covered a report from the CIA's best clandestine source which stated that the communists were calling for final victory in 1975 and that Saigon would be attacked. A week later (April 17) in a briefing to the WSAG, the DCI concluded that the communists would have overpowering forces deployed for an assault on Saigon within a matter of days and that a communist military victory was likely within one to three weeks.

15. The sense of inevitable and impending defeat continued to be sounded in the DCI's briefings of the WSAG throughout the remainder of April. Following are some of the statements made by the DCI:

-- On April 19: The South Vietnamese face total defeat -- and soon. North Vietnamese planning envisions victory within ten days of opening the assault on Saigon and before May 19.

* These assessments also concluded that Hanoi was no longer interested in the idea of a true transitional southern government. It was estimated that Hanoi was now interested either in a direct military takeover or in providing only the merest fig leaf for a North Vietnamese takeover in the South.

- On April 24: Saigon faces imminent military collapse. The timing is in the hands of the North Vietnamese.
- On April 28: There appears little time left to reach any kind of negotiated capitulation in which non-communists have any role in a new government -- probably one to three days.
- On April 29 (one day before Saigon fell): A complete takeover in Saigon appears inevitable today or tomorrow.

16. As the military situation deteriorated, some evidence appeared that a negotiated settlement on communist terms might be possible that would spare Saigon and its population from a direct military takeover, and allow an orderly evacuation of Americans plus possibly those Vietnamese who desired to leave. During the last half of April, the Hungarians, the Poles and the French in Saigon were encouraging the US Mission there to work toward such a solution and were suggesting that their own contacts with the North Vietnamese led them to be optimistic about the prospects.

17. The assessments of the intelligence community in Washington gave some consideration to the possibility that a negotiated arrangement of this sort might be attainable. In general, however, our appraisals considered the odds to be against such an outcome, and it was clearly recognized that such an arrangement would, in effect, be a surrender on communist terms. In all cases after late March, the bottom line judgment in our appraisals was that Hanoi had the choice as to whether it would settle for anything short of total military victory.

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18. In early April, for example, the intelligence community acknowledged that South Vietnam's fate was sealed, but that Hanoi might eschew a decisive military stroke for a brief period in the hope of achieving its goal through the less costly and more politically expedient of Saigon's collapse from within. As time passed, the intelligence judgments repeatedly stressed that time was working against any negotiated settlement — even one of communist terms. Several excerpts from these judgments follow:

- On April 3: If the military situation is not stabilized, Saigon might collapse militarily before arrangements to replace Thieu or to attempt negotiations can materialize.
- On 21 April: The best that a new South Vietnamese government can probably obtain would be a negotiated surrender under the guise of a "political solution." But unless the communists halt their military advance in the next day or so, a collapse of South Vietnamese will and GVN authority could make even this orderly transfer of power impossible. The communists have assumed an even tougher line on negotiations. The line now being advanced is that final victory is at hand and that there will be no negotiations or any form of tripartite government.
- On April 22: At this point the communists' public response to Thieu's resignation gives no encouragement to the prospects for negotiations. For Saigon, there simply may not be enough time left for the round of political maneuvering that is already underway.

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- On April 24: On the political front, the communists this week quashed any lingering hopes of a genuine compromise, or a quick cease-fire . . . There is a good chance that the North Vietnamese timetable will allow very little time for the political process in Saigon to produce a government with which the communists might deal.
- On April 26: We now believe that Hanoi has been deliberately holding back militarily in order to allow some time for the evacuation process and for a government of surrender to be established in Saigon.*
- On April 28: The new Saigon government's dilemma is whether it can arrange a capitulation in which non-communists have some role in a new government before the North Vietnamese bring about a total collapse of the Saigon government. There appears to be little time left to reach such a denouement -- probably one to three days.
- On April 29: The Minh government has been overtaken by events, and a complete North Vietnamese military takeover appears inevitable today or tomorrow.

* This is the closest that American intelligence came to accepting the thesis that the lull in the fighting at this time might mean Hanoi was willing to negotiate an end of the war. By the next day we had reverted to a more negative judgment on the prospect of negotiations.

TOP-SECRET

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In Sum: The Record in Retrospect

19. The intelligence record on the events leading up to Saigon's defeat by the North Vietnamese is a strong one. Clearly there were some deficiencies: there was a tendency to overestimate the resiliency of the South Vietnamese forces; and there was an initial underestimation of the speed and success with which the communist would move to exploit the situation following Thieu's decision to retrench militarily. Even in these areas, however, we repeatedly made clear that time was short and working in the communists' favor.

20. The overall record was sound and right on the mark.

- North Vietnamese strategy for the dry season campaign was clearly and accurately laid out, and the conclusion reached that the communists in response to a major opportunity might move to an all-out offensive. (Such an opportunity arose after the debacle which followed Thieu's mid-March decision to retrench militarily — even the communists were surprised at the speed with which the South Vietnamese forces collapsed.)
- It was stressed that the question of US military assistance and the South Vietnamese perceptions concerning it were key factors conditioning South Vietnam's prospects. The belief that such assistance would not be forthcoming undermined the resolve of the South Vietnamese and encouraged the North Vietnamese to push harder, and the intelligence community emphasized this fact.

- The community also stressed that the loss of Phuoc Long Province to the communists in January 1975 gave Hanoi increased assurance that it did not have to fear US reaction to heightened aggressive actions, and further discouraged the South Vietnamese for the same reason. The loss of Ban Me Thuot in early March only served to emphasize these points.
- It was recognized and reported that Thieu's mid-March decision was a turning point in the war; within three weeks of this event, the intelligence assessments held that South Vietnam's fate was sealed and that it was only a matter of weeks or months before Saigon either collapsed or was totally defeated by the North Vietnamese. This assessment grew increasingly more pessimistic and precise as the days passed by in April.
- It was repeatedly stated that the best the non-Communists could retrieve from the situation was a negotiated surrender on communist terms. Further, it was pointed out that time was working against such an outcome and that the communists were preparing for the final assault on Saigon.
- Finally (and this had been a consistent theme in intelligence judgments for years), the community emphasized on a number of occasions that it was the North Vietnamese, and not any indigenous communist military force or apparatus in the South, that was threatening the GVN. The point was made that Hanoi would have little interest, once victorious, in maintaining anything other than the most threadbare facade of a separate southern entity.

Events since Saigon's downfall on April 30 have borne this judgment out in full -- North Vietnam has been forced to bring personnel down from North Vietnam to administer the South, and there is no question that it is Hanoi, not any person or group in the South, which is making all important decision concerning Vietnam.

TOP SECRET

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ANNEX

SUMMARIES AND EXCERPTS FROM INTELLIGENCE
ESTIMATES, APPRAISALS, AND DAILY PUBLICATIONS

I. THE FIRST PHASE: DECEMBER 1974 TO MARCH 13, 1975

December 23, 1974, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 53/14.3-74),
"Short Term Prospects for Vietnam":

- Communist military forces in South Vietnam are more powerful than ever before. "
- Hanoi has a variety of military options, but the evidence points toward a marked increase in military action between December 1974 and mid-1975.
- We believe that the communists will commit part of their strategic reserve to exploit major vulnerabilities in the South Vietnamese position or to maintain the momentum of their military effort.
- Without an immediate increase in US military assistance, the GVN's military situation will be parlous, and Saigon might explore the possibility of new negotiations with the communists.
- It is even possible -- in response to a major opportunity -- that the communists will move to an all-out offensive by committing all or most of their strategic reserve. But our best judgment now is that they will not do so.
- Hanoi prefers to achieve its dry season goals through a military-political campaign that avoids the risks and losses of an all-out offensive.
- Hanoi probably hopes that by setting limits on its military operations there will be less likelihood of a strong reaction from Washington and that frictions with Moscow and Peking will be minimized.
- At currently appropriated levels of US military assistance, however, the level of combat we anticipate in the next six months will place the communists in a position of significant advantage over the South Vietnamese Armed Forces in subsequent fighting.

TOP SECRET

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January 6, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "...additional government reinforcement of Phuoc Binh is not contemplated and its defenders have been told to withdraw if the situation became untenable."
- "Communist attacks during the past four days have made heavy use of artillery and armor."

January 7, 1975, DCI Briefing for January 7 WSAG Meeting, "The Situation in Indochina,"

- The communists are continuing to build up their manpower and supply position in South Vietnam. They are more powerful and in better shape logistically than at any time in the war.
- The Saigon government, on the other hand, is concerned over diminished US military aid.
- Recent reporting from reliable sources clearly points to a further step up in the fighting during the next six months.
- The latest National Intelligence Estimate on Vietnam concluded the step up would fall short of a general offensive this year.
- However, if Hanoi perceived particular South Vietnamese vulnerabilities as a result of aid cutbacks, internal political troubles, or a firm rejection by the US, it probably would commit some of its strategic reserve divisions to exploit the situation.

January 7, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Communist attacks on Phuoc Binh were intended to gauge the willingness and ability of the South Vietnamese forces to hold positions against heavy Vietnamese assaults."
- Although outnumbered defenders at Phuoc Binh had fought well, South Vietnamese commanders were questioning "the government's willingness or ability to match the North Vietnamese artillery and armor."

January 10, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- It was reported that senior South Vietnamese military leaders concurred in the decision not to reinforce Phuoc Binh realizing "that it would have weakened government defenses" in more strategic areas.
- "...the psychological boost afforded to the communists by the seizure of Phuoc Binh would increase Hanoi's willingness to move against a more significant provincial capital."

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January 22, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- It was judged that the CVN's policy of abandoning remote and militarily significant positions would "probably lead to the loss of more territory" but that "Saigon should be in better shape to stand up to the communists if they attempt to. . . attack rice growing or populated areas. . . According to one recent report, the government does not believe that it can successfully defend either Kontum or An Loc, the capitals of Kontum and Binh Long provinces, if the communists mount heavy attacks on the towns. In addition, the South Vietnamese probably will have to give up territory in western Pleiku, Darlac, and Quang Duc provinces, but they should be able to stop the communists from taking any of these provincial capitals."

January 25, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "North Vietnam's 316th or at least part of it may be moving South Vietnam from its normal area of operations in North Vietnam. . . it would be the first North Vietnam division to do so since the cease-fire agreement."

February 5, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- ". . . the recent movement of the North Vietnamese 968th division from southern Laos into the highlands" was reported as were "reports that the 320th division is moving farther south to attack targets in Darlac and Quang Duc."

February 13, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- It was reported that the communists planned to "overrun all of Tay Ninh Province as the communists did in Phuoc Long province last month." It was judged that "Saigon will make strenuous efforts to defend Tay Ninh province."

February 27, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "North Vietnam appears about to move one of its reserve divisions -- the 341st -- to the south."

March 6, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The upsurge in fighting in the central highlands suggests that the North Vietnamese have started their spring campaign in that area." It was judged that South Vietnam faced a "difficult

- A3 -

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situation in the highlands" with "Kontum City especially vulnerable" and that the government "with limited resupply capabilities and a large area to defend. . . will be under pressure if the communists decide to launch heavy and sustained attacks."

March 8, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- Heavy fighting in the highlands was reported which had "isolated Pleiku City from resupply by land. . . the government has encountered intense North Vietnamese resistance near some of the strategic mountain passes."

March 11, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Communist forces are maintaining heavy pressure against government positions in the northern provinces and central highlands. South Vietnamese commanders believe they can hold Ban Me Thuot, capital of Darlac Province, if they can keep the city's airfields open and get in reinforcements."

March 12, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Fighting continues at Ban Me Thuot in the central highlands . . . but the situation is precarious. The major land routes into the city are still cut, and both airfields are now in communist hands."

II. THE SECOND PHASE: MARCH 13 TO APRIL 3, 1975

March 13, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "President Thieu has ordered the return of the airborne division from the northern provinces to Saigon, presumably as a reserve that could be deployed to critical areas around the capital. If such a move takes place, the balance of forces in Military Region 1 will shift to the communists' favor."

March 15, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- It was reported that President Thieu had "ordered General Phu to begin withdrawing his forces from Pleiku and Kontum provinces today" and that "the recapture of Ban Me Thuot was the single most important objective in Military Region 2." It was reported, however, that the communists already "occupy large portions of Ban Me Thuot" and that there was evidence "that elements of two North Vietnamese reserve divisions -- the 316th and the 341st -- arrived recently in central and southern South Vietnam."

TOP SECRET

March 17, 1975, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (CIA/DIA/INR),
"Appraisal of Situation in South Vietnam"

- The actions by GVN President Thieu to withdraw South Vietnam forces from major portions of northern and central South Vietnam coupled with developments in the US, particularly the US debates and actions on the question of aid to South Vietnam, appear to have led Hanoi to sense that it has an opportunity to achieve a quick victory.
- The North Vietnamese have already increased their military activity and Hanoi's leaders have decided to step up the level of military pressure even further in the weeks and months immediately ahead.
- Although President Thieu's decision can be explained in terms of military expedience, it nonetheless risks a psychological unraveling within ARVN that could seriously complicate an orderly consolidation of the GVN's military position.
- The permanent relocation of some South Vietnamese units away from their traditional areas of operation could impact sharply on the fighting esprit of soldiers in these units.
- The withdrawal from the central highlands is already causing serious morale problems among government troops there. We expect this is likely in other areas of the country.
- President Thieu's military judgment is already being seriously questioned.
- We believe that Hanoi will move quickly to exploit the GVN's new vulnerability in the northern provinces and will, if necessary, commit some of its remaining strategic reserve to capture Hue.
- The North Vietnamese will probably choose to bypass Da Nang, but should make significant gains in southern MR 1. In MR 2, the North Vietnamese will soon occupy Kontum and Pleiku and should have little difficulty establishing control over the inland portions of the whole northern half of the region.
- Our net judgment of the most likely course of events over the next several months hinges on psychological imponderables. A mood of defeatism -- produced by GVN reverses, communist gains, dwindling supplies, South Vietnamese perceptions of US behavior, or any combination of such factors -- could become infectious and rapidly self-confirming.

- A5 -

TOP SECRET

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- We believe that there is a good chance that this kind of attitudinal collapse can be avoided unless the South Vietnamese see a major change in US assistance policies.
- Barring such a psychological collapse, we believe that the GVN will survive the communist campaign still in control of most of the heavily populated and economically important areas of the country, essentially the southern third of South Vietnam and major portions of the north-central coast, including the major cities of Da Nang, Qui Nhon, and Nha Trang.
- This will be at a heavy cost in supplies and materiel so that the communists will be in an even stronger position for subsequent fighting than we estimated last December (1974).
- At best the results of this year's campaign are bound to contribute to popular frustration and war weariness within GVN areas and will fuel public and private criticism of Thieu. For the time being, we see little prospect of new negotiations between the GVN and the communists.

March 18, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- It was reported that the situation in the highlands was "deteriorating rapidly" and that "the South Vietnamese 23rd Division, ordered to recapture Ban Me Thuot, is being pushed eastward into the mountains."

March 19, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "President Thieu has abandoned plans to recapture Ban Me Thuot."
- It was also reported that the departure of the airborne division from Military Region 1 has produced "a potentially critical situation. The departure of the full airborne division has upset the regional commander's plans to reinforce Quang Tin Province", and he "expects it to fall to the communists."

March 20, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "The Situation in Indochina"

- Our judgment is that the GVN will eventually lose Hue. We are fairly confident, however, that Da Nang will hold.
- The communists have significantly augmented their combat forces throughout much of South Vietnam, and they clearly intend to

- A6 -

TOP SECRET

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exploit the government's unwillingness to defend remote portions of the country. Hanoi has also sent a large number of replacements south -- another strong indication of intent to increase the level of fighting still further.

- There is a risk that a mood of defeatism will take hold and lead to an unraveling of the GVN's political and military cohesion.
- Although a fairly orderly military consolidation can probably be achieved, Saigon's fallback strategy will leave the communists in a much stronger strategic military position than they probably earlier had hoped to achieve through this year's dry season campaign.

March 21, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- The government's strategy for the northern provinces now calls for the establishment of four enclaves at Da Nang, Hue, Chu Lai, and Quang Ngai City. As communist pressure increases, both Chu Lai and Quang Ngai are to be surrendered, if necessary, before Hue."

March 24, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The South Vietnamese position in the northern provinces is rapidly deteriorating" and "pressure is building around major cities of the central coast."
- ". . . as criticism grows against President Thieu, anti-Americanism threatens to reach serious proportions."

March 25, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The government's ability to make a strong defense at Da Nang appears to be increasingly questionable."
- "The lack of clear orders from Saigon reportedly is affecting government forces and causing unnecessary losses of territory."

March 26, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Many of the country's territorial forces and some regular units have found themselves facing substantially superior enemy forces and have lost their will to fight."

- A7 -

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- "The North Vietnamese have been reacting with uncharacteristic speed to the rapid pullback and collapse of South Vietnamese forces in the northern half of the country."

March 27, 1975, Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 53/14.3-75),
 "Assessment of the Situation in South Vietnam"

- The situation in South Vietnam has rapidly deteriorated since President Thieu's decision in mid-March to shift to a strategy of military retrenchment.
- The communists have the capability to exploit their gains, and we believe that they will.
 - Da Nang's defense could simply collapse. In any event, it will be lost within two weeks to a North Vietnamese attack, perhaps within a few days if the GVN Marine division is removed.
 - In MR 2, the thinly stretched government forces will be no match for the North Vietnamese. In the face of strong communist attacks, the South Vietnamese will be unable to defend their enclaves in the region.
 - In MRs 3 and 4, the government is expected to maintain a strong defense line around heavily populated and rice growing areas, but some retraction of defenses is probable.
- Communist momentum will be hard to stop, and the North Vietnamese may be tempted to commit the remaining portion of strategic reserve to exploit the situation. Even if they do so, we believe that the GVN's military strength in the southern part of the country will enable it to survive the dry season, although additional losses were certain.
- Even so, the GVN will probably be left with control over little more than the delta and Saigon and surrounding populated areas. The result is likely to be defeat by early 1976.

March 28, 1975, DCI Briefing for ^{NSC} ~~USAC~~ Meeting, "The Situation in Vietnam"

- The South Vietnamese withdrawals over the past two weeks amount to a major defeat, and additional losses are certain. Nonetheless, we believe that the GVN has enough military strength in the southern part of the country to survive the current dry season. The government will face further communist pressure from a substantially weakened position, however, and it is likely to be defeated in early 1976.

- A8 -

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- The government has already virtually conceded all of Military Regions 1 and 2 to the communists, and the few remaining enclaves along the north-central coast are expected to fall.
- In MR 1, the South Vietnamese military forces are in disarray and are no match for the communists should an attack come soon.
- In MR 2, the North Vietnamese are far stronger than the remaining government forces. We think it unlikely that the South Vietnamese will be able to hold on to several population centers along the coast.
- Apart from the reverses in South Vietnam, there are external factors which could further undermine the GVN.
- The collapse of Cambodia would bring added psychological pressure on Saigon.
- The continuing debate in the US on the question of aid to South Vietnam is also an unsettling factor.
- Thieu probably assumes that he will have to rely on what he already has; but a general belief in South Vietnam that the US will not respond with assistance to meet the new situation would fuel defeatism.

March 28, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "It is probably only a matter of time before an attempt is made to organize a move to oust Thieu and replace him with a senior military leader.

March 29, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Hanoi has apparently decided to commit a third strategic reserve division -- the 320B -- to the current offensive in South Vietnam.
- "The tone of current Vietnamese propaganda makes it certain that Hanoi now sees the clear possibility of a final unraveling of Saigon's position."
- A communist newspaper editorial claimed that "only the removal of Thieu could lead to negotiations and a 'speedy settlement of South Vietnam's affairs.'"

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April 2, 1975, DCI Briefing for 2 April WSAG Meeting, "The Situation in Vietnam"

- There are two ways the situation could now evolve:
 - There could be a stabilization of the situation in Military Regions 3 and 4. But even if this occurs, it will probably be only temporary until the communists bring more military pressure to bear.
 - The process of demoralization and defeatism already underway could prove irreversible and lead quickly to the collapse of the GVN and its will to resist.
- The debate and congressional action on the question of US aid to South Vietnam will be a key factor in the situation.
- We believe that Hanoi intends to push its military advantage as forcefully and as rapidly as possible.
- The balance of forces in South Vietnam now has shifted decisively in the communists' favor.
- Thieu's political position is now highly vulnerable. Major political change, as a prelude to a settlement on communist terms, could occur at any time.
- Hanoi now clearly sees victory in its grasp.
- It seems fairly clear that Hanoi is now interested in providing only the barest of fig leaves for a communist takeover in the South.

III. THE THIRD PHASE: APRIL 3 TO APRIL 30, 1975

April 3, 1975, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (CIA/DIA/INR), "Likely Political Developments in Vietnam"

- We believe that in a matter of months, if not weeks, Saigon will collapse militarily or a government will be installed that will agree to a settlement on communist terms.
- We believe that major political changes will occur in coming weeks and may be imminent; these changes will eventually lead to a settlement on communist terms. If the military situation is not stabilized, Saigon may collapse militarily before arrangement to replace Thieu or to attempt negotiations could materialize.

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April 4, 1975, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (CIA/DIA/INR),
"Assessment of the Military Situation and Prospects for South Vietnam"

- Taking all factors into account, the only question over the defeat of the Republic of Vietnam is timing -- whether it will collapse or be militarily overwhelmed in a period of weeks or months.
- We see two general courses of military action for the communists.
 - The application of massive force to inflict final defeat.
 - Envelop Saigon, "cut off its supplies, and thereby bring the GVN to its knees."
- Under the first course of action, we believe that the GVN will collapse or be defeated by the end of June, if not considerably sooner.
- Under the second course of action, we believe that the GVN might fall by the end of June.
- In sum, Hanoi is in a good position to take whatever action it considers necessary to win the war. While a quick, decisive military stroke may be in the works, we believe that Hanoi will opt for a less costly and politically more expedient alternative, calculating that a South Vietnamese collapse from within is near at hand. At the same time, however, communist units will position themselves for a final attack should their preferred course fail. Whatever the case, South Vietnam's fate appears sealed.

April 8, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Hanoi is sending one of its last three reserve divisions to South Vietnam. It was reported that the 312th Division and two other divisions of the North Vietnamese first corps 'may well be headed for Saigon' and that this 'would sharply tilt the military balance in favor of the communists.'"

April 9, 1975, DCI Briefing for NSC Meeting, "Vietnam"

- The fighting is likely to intensify further in the near future.
- Our best clandestine source on communist plans in the South has recently reported on new COSVN instructions which call for achieving final victory this year rather than 1976.

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- According to the agent, communist gains have far exceeded their expectations for 1975 and have created the "most opportune moment" for total victory this year.
- The agent also claims that when "the time comes" the North Vietnamese will attack Saigon.
- In terms of capabilities, the strategic balance decisively favors the communists.
- On paper, the GVN's long-term prospects are bleak, no matter how well Saigon's forces and commanders acquit themselves in the fighting that lies ahead.
- In sum, we believe Hanoi will take whatever action is necessary to force the war to an early conclusion — probably by early summer. The remaining questions have to do with communist tactics and timing, and whether or not a political solution on communist terms can be arranged prior to a final South Vietnamese military collapse.

April 9, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "New instructions to communist cadre in South Vietnam call for a continuation of the present offensive until 'total victory' is achieved this year." The instruction said that "talk of negotiations. . . will be used 'merely as stratagems.'" It was noted that "the instructions leave little room for political solutions to the conflict" and that "the communists may now be moving into positions" for final attacks.
- "They currently have eight divisions in Military Regions 3 and 4; at least four of them are positioned in an arc north of Saigon and the others are threatening population centers and supply routes in the delta."

April 10, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "It is doubtful that within the next week the communists will be strong enough for an all-out assault against Saigon. They probably will wait until additional units arrive from the North before attempting such a move."

April 11, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The communists are likely to continue their buildup of air defenses in the newly 'liberated' areas and may even move SA-2 firing units into the provinces north of Saigon."

- A12 -

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April 14, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The communists are moving additional forces into position for an assault in the western approach to Saigon" and "the communists now have almost three full divisions -- the 3rd, 5th, and 9th -- along Saigon's western defense perimeter. . ."

April 15, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Recent reports continue to refer to communist plans to carry out attacks from inside Saigon in the near future. While the communists have the capability of infiltrating small units such as sappers into the capital area, there are no indications yet of communist main force units moving into position for direct attacks on Saigon itself."

April 16, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The recent shellings of Bien Hoa airbase suggest that the communists also now may be planning to shell the outskirts of Saigon and the Tan Son Nhut airbase with their heavy field guns. An offensive by newly arrived divisions north of Saigon, coupled with sapper attacks and shellings of the city itself, might lead to a rapid crumbling of the government's position."

April 17, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "The Situation in Vietnam"

- We believe that the communists will have overpowered forces deployed into positions for an assault on Saigon within a matter of days.
- The communists are now telling their cadre to expect to be in control of Saigon by mid-May. We regard such timing as entirely plausible, and a communist military victory is likely within one to three weeks.
- The Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government has maintained that the best protection the US can afford its personnel is to withdraw them immediately, and that such withdrawals would "not encounter any difficulties or obstacles."
- The communists are warning, however, that the Viet Cong would not tolerate the introduction of "warships and marines" to assist in the evacuations, and that such a scheme would be "severely punished."

- A13 -

TOP SECRET

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- As for the evacuation of South Vietnamese, the Communists are maintaining a hostile public attitude, but we have tenuous indications of possible flexibility in this position.
- South Vietnam Deputy Premier Tran Van Don claims to have been in touch with an intermediary of the PRC who alleges that the evacuation of South Vietnamese would be permitted in return for a change of government in Saigon and political surrender.
- Don is an opportunist and we are skeptical about his veracity.
- Nonetheless, the Communists do appear to be peddling the line that if Thieu were replaced a less bloody outcome would be possible. This theme surfaced in a recent report of a conversation between Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang and an individual whom he believed was a PRC representative. North Vietnamese and PRC representatives in Paris have made similar statements in the past week or so.

April 17, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Recent reporting makes clear that the communists will waste little time in exploiting their overwhelming advantage in terms of troops and fire-power."
- "Our most reliable source of communist intentions in southern South Vietnam has recently reported that the communists have issued instructions calling for "final" assaults on remaining government positions, including Saigon. This report notes that fresh combat units have arrived in the provinces around Saigon and states that all communist resources will be used to achieve total victory by May 19 -- the anniversary of Ho Chi Minh's birth."

April 19, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- South Vietnam faces total defeat -- and soon.
- The military situation east of Saigon is critical, and large scale attacks on the northern, western, and southern approaches to the capital will probably begin within two days to a week.
- To sum up, Saigon's military situation has now deteriorated irretrievably, and the North Vietnamese will be able to finish the city off if a political resolution is not reached.

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- A collapse of will in the GVN could bring about the end in a few days.
- NVA planning envisions victory within ten days of opening the assault and before May 19.
- In the best case, the fall should take place within three weeks or a month.

April 19, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- ". . . in a matter of days the communists will have 17 full divisions to commit against remaining government divisions defending the capital and the delta and will outnumber the government forces by about two to one."

April 20, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- The basic conclusions and judgments of our briefing yesterday still hold, although in one specific we are somewhat more pessimistic.
- The communists may already be in the initial phase of their three-pronged assault on the capital.
- Bien Hoa will probably be lost in a few days.
- Political opposition to President Thieu continues to mount in Saigon, and a coup attempt or major political crisis could occur at any time.

April 21, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- At this point the best that a new government can probably obtain would be a negotiated surrender under the guise of a "political solution". But unless the communists halt their military advance in the next day or so, a collapse of South Vietnamese will and GVN authority could make even this kind or orderly transfer of power impossible.
- The communists have assumed an even tougher line on negotiations. The line now being advanced in COSVN briefings and guidelines is that final victory is at hand, and that there will be no negotiations or any form of tripartite government.

- A15 -

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TOP-SECRET

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April 21, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The communists appear to be ruling out any consideration of a genuine negotiation of the conflict. At a press conference in Saigon Saturday, the Viet Cong spokesman carefully avoided mentioning negotiations with the present government or even a reconstituted one such as they had been demanding."
- "An equally tough line reportedly emerged from a secret briefing of senior communist officials in COSVN [in April] A reliable source stated that COSVN believed the 'whole thing' would be finished in a short time and that the communists would not agree to enter into negotiations, nor would they join any tripartite coalition government."

April 22, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- At this point the communists' public response to President Thieu's resignation gives no encouragement to the prospects for negotiations.
- In short, the communists appear to be telling us that a totally new South Vietnamese government and a quick and total US withdrawal will be the price for surrender.
- For Saigon, there simply may not be enough time left for the round of political maneuvering that is already underway.

April 22, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The communists have ruled out any real compromise settlement, implying that nothing less than total surrender would be acceptable. Initial communist reaction to the Thieu resignation has continued this line. A Viet Cong spokesman in Paris has been quoted as stating that before negotiations could be considered, the US must "halt all interference in Vietnam" and that not only Thieu "but also his whole regime must be overthrown."
- "At this point, the very best a new South Vietnamese government might obtain is a negotiated surrender. Given the proximity of communist military forces to Saigon -- and the very real prospect of a rapid disintegration of South Vietnamese military will in the wake of Thieu's resignation -- time may already have run out for any such orderly transfer of power."

- A16 -

TOP-SECRET

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TOP SECRET

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April 23, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- Both Chinese and Soviet media have now picked up Hanoi's line that the resignation of Thieu, by itself, is not enough to get talks started.
- The communists appear to be repositioning their troops for future action.

April 23, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- It was judged that the communists' reaction to Thieu's resignation "provides no encouragement for the prospects of meaningful negotiations. The Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government dismissed Thieu's departure as a 'clumsy and deceptive trick.' Hanoi's radio and party daily, Nahan Dan, focused on the continuation of American support for the new government and stated that the US in effect had replaced one loser with another. The North Vietnamese commentaries also gave considerable attention to the withdrawal of Americans from South Vietnam. They stated that all Americans could be evacuated 'in a very short time, even in one day, without any difficulty or obstacle.' They went on to condemn strongly US expressions of concern about communist reprisals and warned against any US effort to evacuate large numbers of South Vietnamese. US naval vessels moving toward South Vietnamese waters, it was stated, are far more than would be needed simply to evacuate Americans."
- "In short, the communists are continuing to demand a totally new South Vietnamese government and a quick and total US withdrawal as the price for a negotiated surrender. At least in their public commentary, there is no hint of give in their position, but there is the clear implication that time is quickly running out."

April 24, 1975, DCI Briefing for NSC Meeting:

- The fate of the Republic of Vietnam is sealed, and Saigon faces imminent military collapse. The timing is in the hands of the North Vietnamese, who now hold an overwhelming military advantage.
- On the political front, the communists this week quashed any lingering hopes of a genuine compromise, or a quick cease-fire, which would provide the best circumstances for an

TOP-SECRET-

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orderly evacuation of Americans and those South Vietnamese most vulnerable to communist reprisal.

- The communists are demanding that the entire South Vietnamese government be replaced by persons not associated with the previous Thieu regime.
- The communists are now focusing their harshest attacks on the US, demanding a total withdrawal of the US presence in Vietnam and support for Saigon. An authoritative North Vietnamese commentary two days ago (April 22) stated that all Americans could be evacuated "in a very short time, even in one day, without any difficulty or obstacle."
- At the same time, Hanoi appears to be warning that the communists will not agree to, and even will interfere with, any US effort to conduct a large-scale exodus of South Vietnamese.
- The best a new government could probably obtain would be a negotiated surrender.
- We may be near the formation of a government with some chance of dealing with the communists on this basis.
- There is a good chance that the North Vietnamese timetable will allow very little additional time for the political process in Saigon to produce a government with which the communists might deal.
- If the communist military advance resumes in earnest in the next few days, a collapse of South Vietnamese will and GVN authority could make this kind of orderly transfer of power impossible.

April 25, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "A Viet Cong commentary broadcast over Liberation Radio today hardened earlier communist demands for a new government and appeared to support Minh's argument that he is the only South Vietnamese nationalist of prominence with whom the communists might agree to negotiate. The commentary stated that any new government in Saigon must 'not consist of those who have closely associated with Thieu.' Such a government must demand

- A18 -

TOP-SECRET-

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that the Americans immediately withdraw personnel and support and remove 'all US warships and Marines.' The commentary also reiterated earlier communist concern about the US evacuations of South Vietnamese and implied that some action might be taken to stop them. It warned that the US would 'be held fully responsible for all consequences' if it insisted on continuing its 'present policy.'"

April 26, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- We now believe that Hanoi has been deliberately holding back militarily in order to allow some time for the evacuation process and for a government of surrender to be established in Saigon.
- The North Vietnamese are continuing their preparations for attacks on Saigon and Tan Son Nhut airbase.
- In sum, the action for the moment has shifted to the political arena.

April 26, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government, through its foreign minister, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, has indicated that it would consider negotiations with a government headed by Minh. Minh's selection of individuals for his government complies with a PRG demand that the new Saigon administration must represent a clean break from the former regime and include no one who was sympathetic to former President Thieu."
- "In a statement on April 24, the PRG used a formulation that at least suggested the communists might allow a residual US diplomatic presence to continue in Saigon; it stated that any new government must demand the immediate withdrawal of all American 'military and intelligence personnel'. This appears to be a refinement of earlier statements that the communists viewed all American civilians in South Vietnam as 'disguised' military advisers and that all these must also be included in the total withdrawal."
- "Communist radio messages also continue to discuss preparations for attacks on Saigon and the Tan Son Nhut airbase. One command recently requested 'targeting charts' for areas close to the city so that 'when we have a mission we will be able to develop it and prepare to move down into the area when conditions are right for the advance.'"

- A19 -

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April 28, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- Bien Hoa and its airbase should fall in a few hours if the North Vietnamese press the attack.
- Resistance at Long Binh will probably soon come to an end.
- Tay Ninh and Tan An will fall soon to the communists.
- In sum, the North Vietnamese have resumed military pressure on Saigon. Minh's dilemma is whether he can arrange a capitulation in which non-communists have some role in a new government before the North Vietnamese bring about a total collapse of the Saigon government. There appears to be little time left to reach such a denouement -- probably one to three days.

April 28, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "Minh is scheduled to be sworn in today. He reportedly plans to announce cabinet appointments today or tomorrow. His new government can do little more than arrange for surrender under the guise of a 'political solution.'"
- "Initial communist reaction to his appointment has so far been a 'no comment.' A spokesman for the Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government in Saigon, when questioned by the press Sunday, only said that the communists insisted on three basic conditions: the removal of Thieu and his 'clique,' the complete withdrawal of the US, and the 'elimination of the war machine.' This last demand, broadcast for the first time Saturday over the Viet Cong's Liberation Radio, appears to be a call on the new Minh government to make it an early order of business to call on South Vietnam's military establishment to 'stack arms' and cease further resistance."

April 29, 1975, DCI Briefing for WSAG Meeting, "Vietnam"

- Communist forces are now on the outskirts of Saigon and clearly in position to occupy it.
- The Minh government has been overtaken by events, and a complete North Vietnamese military takeover in Saigon appears inevitable today or tomorrow.

April 29, 1975, Daily Intelligence Publication:

- "The North Vietnamese assault on the capital came on the heels of the communist rejection yesterday of President Minh's call

- A20 -

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for negotiations. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong media have characterized the new Saigon government as just another 'reactionary administration' and reiterated earlier demands that the government's administrative structure 'be abolished', its 'war machine' dismantled and that the US leave immediately. In a desperate effort to meet some of these demands, the Minh government today requested that all American personnel leave the country within 24 hours and announced plans to overhaul the governmental apparatus and legalize the communist party. In another desperate gesture of reconciliation, Saigon Radio today referred to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong as 'our brothers of the other side.'"

- A21 -

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